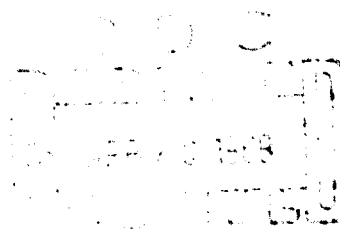


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AS AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY

Constantine Menges

March 1968



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DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTIONARY INSURGENCY
AS AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY

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Repeated experiences of the post-World War II period make clear that the necessity for the United States government to collaborate with certain kinds of foreign governments in order to defeat what are deemed dangerous communist political movements has often deprived our action of legitimacy in the domestic arena, and prevented us from using our greatest asset in political warfare -- a genuine dedication to social and political reform. Alliance with some regimes has proven inefficient at the time of struggle against a communist insurgency and, after the military victory was won, has prevented or severely limited the capacity of the United States to promote any kind of permanent social-economic changes, with the

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result that the original conditions remain to fuel a new outburst after a decade or so passes.

It does not take too much political imagination to realize that alliance with some kinds of regimes in countries that might be threatened by communist insurgency in the next decade would likewise be an obstacle -- and in some cases an impassable one -- to any conceivable success against a well-organized communist movement. Examples that come to mind are Guatemala, the Philippines, Thailand, perhaps Iran, Afghanistan, and no doubt other countries could be mentioned. In fact, in countries with "unsuitable" governments the more the U.S. government might attempt to work in collaboration with the legal government to defeat an insurgency, the stronger the rebellion might become. For example, economic assistance funds might serve to feed the existing corruption apparatus, erode whatever administrative integrity existed, attract the parasites and powerful and thereby make the ally government even weaker than it was. Foreign economic aid might also increase the supply of funds for protection payments, "insurance donations," or outright contributions to the communist insurgent cause. The impressive and advanced military supplies donated by the United States

would equip the army for non-fighting via technological proxy and, of course, more than a small portion would find its way through black market channels to the insurgents -- radios for better communication, new rifles and ammunition, explosives and medical supplies would probably be the items most frequently stolen by the insurgents or sold by profit-minded generals and government officials.

And, of course, in most countries the majority of people don't feel friendly toward the police and military forces that operate on the domestic scene. This applies equally to national police forces, palace guards, special anti-guerrilla forces and the military organizations. One of the great difficulties and paradoxes of the collaboration route to the destruction of communist insurgencies is that the police and security apparatus of the national regime, usually the most feared and disliked element of any government, is the first to be strengthened since it does, after all, have the formal purpose of repression. Increasing the mobility, armament, pay and size of an already corrupt, brutal or inefficient national police force or army will usually aid a communist insurgency in gaining popular support. In addition, the

government's ability to cope with the threat could be weakened if various military services and units that are being strengthened by this aid grow more politically active and begin to battle each other more than the insurgents.

What can be done about this general problem, a problem that is at least implicitly understood and recognized in wide circles. The answer comes in several stages. First, the very act of asking whether collaboration with a particular regime will be useful or harmful is an important giant step beyond the assumption that the only way the U.S. government can operate in foreign countries is through the official governments. There should now be some attempt to analyze whether the gains of collaboration outweigh the costs -- and to develop a sensitivity to the whole set of personality, bureaucratic, and institutional conditions that will determine whether a given regime can or will be effective as an ally.

Unfortunately, this question sometimes cannot be answered until some attempts at collaboration are made. Put here the very expectations the regime has about U.S. actions are critical and they might directly affect its performance. If, for example, it is believed that the

United States for some reason has decided to save this country from a communist insurgency and all the regime now need do is keep going and also keep the insurgents going long enough to make salvation really "worthwhile," then it may be practically impossible for the United States to seriously affect the actions and plans of the "ally" government. However, if it were believed that the United States might abstain from involvement, or pursue other strategies -- assuming the United States had some defined objectives and stated some prerequisites and conditions of assistance -- then the situation might be much improved.

Experience has shown that the United States can exert significant influence on ally governments only if it can make credible to an ally regime that it has alternatives to collaboration. Such explicitly outlined alternatives are necessary. First, to preserve the capacity of the U.S. government to bargain with, and, if necessary, coerce ally governments in a counterinsurgency effort; and, secondly, they may also be necessary to ensure the successful defeat of a communist insurgency. ~~What are~~ some alternatives?

Democratic Revolutionary Insurgency: Triangle Warfare

The most often considered is some kind of internal shuffle within the regime's governing groups, usually accomplished by military coup. This involves minimum levels of mass participation, uprisings, disturbances and the like. But it generally preserves the upper-level administrative structures in most bureaucracies and, by the same token, often leaves the successor regime quite constrained as to new policy alternatives. The coup against Diem in Vietnam is a good case in point. Although the "coup alternative" has the advantage of leaving some kind of government intact, and therefore is generally the only alternative seriously considered, in most cases the basic problems of political practice and corruption have not been greatly reduced by the changing of a few leaders who perforce operated within a large and intricate network of social and economic arrangements.

More dramatic and daring as a strategy is the fomenting of a national revolutionary insurgency that would draw upon the best persons within the major social institutions, and unite them in a cohesive movement opposed to both the corrupt government and the communist insurgency. This cannot, of course, even be contemplated

in all countries where the regimes are unacceptable; but it may be feasible in more places than might be imagined at first thought. The cadres of this kind of pro-democratic revolutionary movement would come from the idealists within the religious organizations, from the progressive and democratically oriented within the major professions, the students, the officer corps and leaders of mass organizations. All of these kinds of social groups are more intricately developed and differentiated in more countries than is known or evident to outside observers. The difficult task would probably not be in finding potential recruits, but in organizing the reliable nucleus, preventing the entry of opportunists or informers and building a truly national and reformist political action program and militant organization. Given a motivated, intelligent, and diligent nucleus, this kind of movement could certainly expand in any country where a communist insurgency can grow -- since the recruits to both organizations would have many similarities.

The best possible context and timing for such a strategy would need to be thought about and tried out. Probably the steady growth of a communist group, the heightening of political tension and awareness,

accompanied by the inability of the unaided government to contain the insurgency or provide any leadership to the uncommitted factions and groups would offer the best setting for an attempt to set up or assist such an anti-regime and anti-communist movement. It seems clear that the more dangerous the communist movement grows and the more feeble the legal government's efforts at resistance appear, the greater number of potential recruits there might be for the democratic revolutionary movement. All the brutality of the struggle between the rival terror machines might therefore serve to reinforce the desire of many for some other alternative -- a third choice which usually never exists because it appears hopeless when only the legal government has any chance of non-communist external support and the potential organizers have not been encouraged. The effective democratic revolutionary movement could enter the open battle late, fight against two weakened and tired opponents, and gain more strength and support with every offensive action taken against both the Communists and the legal regime. In other words, all the secular trends, the disruptions and intrinsic tragedies of a country in the throes of communist insurgency, which presently constitute obstacles

to success when the United States attempts to collaborate with unsuitable regimes, might be made to work in favor of the ultimate victory of the U.S.-supported democratic revolutionary movements.

And, after its victory, such a movement would be free of the promissory notes generally held by the legal governments in the unsuitable category -- the debts to generals, financiers and the like that prevent any social policy and reform from being seriously begun. The democratic revolutionary movement, as the new legal regime, then might lay the ground work for permanent change rather than just continuous repression.

Obviously this optimistic scenario-analysis assumes much that remains to be proven; it assumes that the nucleus of such a force could indeed be found and that such a movement could grow; most importantly, it assumes that the U.S. government might either initiate or assist in some meaningful way. The first assumption may be valid in many situations; the second is now and will continue to be unfounded until the possibility of pursuing this type of strategy is seriously considered, given high priority and tried.

Democratic Insurgency Against a New Communist Regime

An even more bizarre alternative rests on a simple and again unproven premise: communist regimes are very vulnerable to a democratic, national revolution that is conducted with skill and determination to succeed. Thus it might be feasible to do nothing to prevent a communist movement from seizing power against a government we consider "unsuitable," but meanwhile make efforts to encourage the formation of an underground resistance organization which will emerge later. Thus, after the communist government had been in power long enough to win that massive unpopularity and bewildered disdain which usually follow after more than six months to a year's experience with the garish consequences of communist economic policy and the unremitting political control, repression, and direction, this resistance organization might make its move. The tactics used would be precisely the same as those immortalized by the Viet Minh and Viet Cong: systematic assassination of key communist officials at all levels of government; selective recruitment of cadre elements; efficient use of limited external material assistance; incessantly "political" warfare meaning establishment of model governments in areas free of

communist government control; attacks on communist military units known to be demoralized and the like.

This may sound like the daydream of a frontiersman who wants to be the Indian for a while -- and indeed there is a pinch of political fantasy in these notions. Yet do we really know that it is impossible to defeat a communist regime by the combination of reformist democratic goals and purposive insurgent warfare? Has it ever been tried? The answer surprisingly is no -- not in the entire postwar period has a serious effort ever been made to defeat a newly arrived communist government by guerrilla warfare. The Cuban underground, had it been better helped, might have provided the first test case; clandestine efforts in North Vietnam, if any, cannot be assessed here, but one may presume that the problems involved, among other things, the deficiencies of the South Vietnamese regime.

These two ideas are, of course, first and not really novel thoughts about a complex topic. They are written to provoke debate and spur the search for means that combine the essence of democratic foreign and internal policy objectives with innovative and successful political operations.